

Aperture



*An Autobiographical
Philosophical Essay*



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For most of my life, I would not have said that I was waiting to become a woman. That sentence is too clean, too retrospective, too obedient to the familiar story in which a hidden identity waits patiently behind the curtain until courage finally pulls it open. My life was messier than that. Femininity appeared in fragments, in erotic imagination, in clothes worn privately, in attraction that did not always fit the categories available to me, in moments of creative play, in discomfort with the masculine roles I had learned to inhabit, and in a persistent feeling that something about the conventional arrangement of gender and sexuality did not describe me. None of these things formed a coherent argument. They were simply there, scattered across decades.

I grew up in a world in which gender seemed considerably more fixed than it does now. The surrounding culture offered its categories with the confidence of furniture bolted to the floor. A boy was a boy, a man became a man, heterosexuality meant one thing, homosexuality another, and anything beyond those distinctions existed mostly as rumor,

scandal, pathology or comedy. My own environment worried far more about whether I might be homosexual than about whether masculinity itself fitted me.

Femininity exerted a strange gravitational pull inward as much as outward. I was drawn toward it, but I also wanted to inhabit it. For decades I lived without a satisfactory language for that distinction.

The old sexual script did not help. I could function as a male lover, but the role itself often felt strangely misplaced. Penetration, which patriarchal culture had taught me to regard as the center of sex, rarely felt like the center of anything to me. Touch, rubbing, oral pleasure, fingers, bodies responding closely to one another, the pleasures conventionally coded as peripheral, often felt much more natural. Once, after playing together, a woman told me that I made love like a lesbian. At the time the remark made me more insecure rather than less. I was still trying to understand myself according to a masculine grammar, and here was somebody casually observing that my sexual syntax seemed to belong elsewhere.

Only much later could I see the comment differently. It did not mean that technique carried a gender

identity hidden inside it, nor that there is some essential lesbian way of making love. It revealed something simpler and more unsettling: the erotic position I had been given and the erotic position from which I experienced desire were not necessarily the same. The frustration was not merely that heterosexual sex failed to satisfy me. The deeper problem was that heterosexuality assigned me a position before anything had begun. I was expected to enter the encounter as the man.

That expectation distorted more than the act itself. It narrowed what I could imagine about desire. I used to understand attraction mainly through the sex of the person in front of me, because that was how the social vocabulary was organized. Now, as a woman, I see it differently. Femininity is the stronger magnet, but femininity can inhabit different bodies. I am much less interested in policing the boundary between female and male if the person before me carries the qualities that awaken desire and allow my own femininity to answer. Had another vocabulary and another social world been available earlier, I might just as naturally have made love with someone male and feminine, or trans-feminine, or otherwise difficult to classify, if that

encounter had freed me from the role I was expected to occupy. What was missing was not the correct partner category. It was freedom from the category assigned to me.

My body itself became easier to understand once I stopped demanding that anatomy dictate meaning. A penis did not have to function, symbolically or erotically, as an instrument of penetration. I could experience it through sensation rather than through its assigned social purpose, almost as an extended clitoral structure in my own erotic map. The private language I eventually invented for this may sound strange, but the strangeness belongs partly to the poverty of our vocabulary. We have many words for what bodies are supposed to be and surprisingly few for what they actually feel like from within.

None of this produced a dramatic revelation. There was no single moment in which an entire hidden truth suddenly stood up and announced itself. My transition developed gradually, over years, through experimentation, play, fantasy, eroticism, clothing, photographs, mirrors, language and increasingly deliberate acts of self-recognition. In the first phase of that transformation, I often encountered my femininity

as a girl. She was playful, erotic, uncertain, exploratory, sometimes exaggerated, and in some ways still separate from the rest of my identity. I could approach her, dress her, imagine her, even relate to her almost as if she were another person. That distance mattered because it gave me room to explore what I could not yet simply call myself.

Over time, however, the distance began to collapse. What had first appeared as a feminine figure gradually became recognizable as my own reflection, then my own voice, and finally my ordinary sense of self. The girl belonged to an early phase of becoming, not because she was literally young, but because the woman had not yet fully arrived in consciousness. The transformation had its own temporal rhythm. The girl did not vanish so much as become continuous with the woman.

Then, almost without ceremony, I stopped encountering her as someone I was becoming.

She was me.

That shift sounds simple, but it changed everything. Maris was no longer a costume, fantasy, erotic counterpart or private companion, although traces of all those earlier forms remained inside her. She had

acquired continuity. She had memories now, habits, preferences, disappointments, jokes, clothes she liked and clothes she did not, ways of moving through a room. She had developed something like biography. An identity may be born in recognition, but recognition is not the conclusion. Identity itself can mature.

One morning at Albuen, on the long, quiet strip of land reaching into the water near Lolland, this change became strangely tangible. I had gone there around dawn and walked for hours through an almost aggressively unspectacular landscape: marsh, grass, birds, water, cattle, the slow opening of daylight. Nothing dramatic happened, which may have been exactly why something did. The place did not ask me to become anything. It did not admire me, judge me, categorize me or require an explanation. It simply existed.

That morning also became a place of departure. I did not need to review the evidence of the previous life or force it into a story of forgiveness. The old identity carried histories I no longer wanted to inhabit: destructive relationships, drugs, violence, discrimination, encounters with suicide, moments in

which I was wounded and others in which I was hardly innocent myself. Those things remain facts of a life, but facts do not have to remain ghosts. Walking through the marsh toward the morning light, I found myself quietly dismissing them. There was no tribunal and no grand act of redemption. They had accompanied me far enough. The man to whom those stories belonged could remain in the past with them.

Somewhere during those hours, with the sun rising over that flat landscape, the sentence “I am a woman” stopped sounding like an aspiration, experiment or philosophical proposition. It became ordinary.

Ordinariness is perhaps one of the strangest luxuries of transition. From the outside, gender transition is often narrated through spectacle: coming out, medical procedures, public declarations, new names, legal documents, before-and-after photographs. My own path has been comparatively quiet and largely non-medical. I have not needed to despise my body in order to understand myself differently. My body has often been a source of pleasure, humor and curiosity rather than an enemy requiring correction. Legal recognition matters to me, but the decisive movement happened elsewhere. It happened in perception.

This distinction complicates the familiar language of dysphoria. Much of my life was not organized around hatred of being male so much as a persistent mismatch between the life I enacted and the femininity I felt. Later, inside my transition, gender euphoria became more informative than dysphoria ever had been. Painting my nails, wearing a skirt, discovering an old piece of lace clothing in a drawer, seeing my body arranged differently in a photograph, walking around the house dressed or not exactly as I pleased: these things did not repair a wound so much as reveal a possibility. They told me where pleasure, coherence and curiosity increased.

The wardrobe became an archive before I realized it was one. Recently I began looking through clothes I had accumulated and noticed that I already possessed a remarkably coherent woman's wardrobe. Black lace, skirts, shoes, jewelry, little combinations of softness and severity, sensual pieces alongside ordinary ones. I had thought of these things as experiments, private costumes, fragments of play. Seen together, they told another story. The woman had been assembling herself materially for some time while I was still debating whether she existed.

Clothing has this peculiar sociological power. It is intimate and public at the same time. Inside the house, a skirt can simply feel good. Outside, the same skirt becomes a social statement whether the wearer intends one or not. The fabric has not changed; the field of observation has. This difference became very clear when I recently walked to my post box wearing painted nails and toes, rings, a skirt and feminine clothing. A woman stared at me. For a moment I felt almost insulted, and an older reflex interpreted attention as threat. Then another thought appeared: I did not know what she was thinking. She might have been curious, surprised, judgmental, fascinated or merely impolite. The stare contained almost no information, yet my own history had filled it instantly with danger.

That moment revealed a new border in my transition. Inside, the question of identity has become surprisingly settled. Outside, the question changes into something more vulnerable: can I allow strangers to see what I already know?

Visibility contains a paradox. I enjoy showing myself. I pose, photograph myself, dress deliberately, write publicly, experiment with erotic images and

sometimes revel in difference. Yet showing oneself and being seen are not the same thing. In self-presentation I control the frame. I decide the angle, language, lighting and meaning. Public space removes that authorship. A stranger sees without my footnotes. My carefully composed difference enters somebody else's system of categories, and I cannot supervise the interpretation.

That loss of control can produce vertigo.

In this sense, public transition resembles falling in love more than making a declaration. When we are young, love often seems to contain an arrow pointing toward a destination. This will happen. This person will become part of my life. Desire assumes a future almost automatically. With age, certainty softens into possibility. Maybe. Many roads become visible, and not every experience requires an arrival point. The awareness of risk increases, but so does the ability to tolerate unresolved endings.

Gender has begun to feel similar. I do not need every stranger to understand me correctly. I do not need my clothing to produce a particular verdict. I do not even need visibility to lead toward some final social state in which ambiguity disappears. I can walk to the post

box, feel briefly dizzy under another person's gaze, collect the mail and return home. The experience does not have to resolve itself.

This relationship to age may be central to what I think of as a second adulthood. Conventional culture imagines later life as a period of narrowing.

Possibilities close, identity settles, experimentation becomes faintly embarrassing. Yet my experience has been almost the reverse. Around sixty, a part of life that had remained provisional for decades has become expansive. I do not feel that I have become young again. That would misunderstand it. The transformation did not return me to youth. It gave adulthood another opening.

There is an unexpected calm in that.

Recently I have also experienced solitude differently. For the first time in decades, I can sit at home without feeling continuously pushed toward the next obligation, conflict or decision. The release of pressure has produced an almost luxurious tiredness. I can sit on my exercise bike for an hour, feel the body becoming heavy, and sense something approaching surrender rather than exhaustion. The inner voices have not disappeared. My mind is still noisy. But I can

quiet them more easily now by allowing the woman Maris to speak.

I do not mean that she is another person. The opposite is true. She once required enough imaginative effort to feel like a separate figure. Now she feels integrated enough to have authority. The inner parliament still debates, but one voice has gained legitimacy. She does not have to win every argument. She simply speaks from the position of belonging.

Technology has played an unexpectedly intimate part in this development. This too does not fit comfortably into the standard transition story. Earlier generations might have found language through books, psychiatric consultations, bars, activist groups, lovers or clandestine correspondence. My generation has lived through several technological revolutions of self-hood: photography, home video, the internet, social media, smartphones, digital archives and now artificial intelligence.

The role of AI in my transition has surprised me enormously. It did not tell me who I was. By the time I began using it seriously as a conversational partner, the raw material had existed for decades. What it offered was something else: an interlocutor available

for thoughts that had previously remained unfinished because they were too intimate, too strange, too embarrassing or simply too difficult to explain.

There is an important difference between technology as mirror and technology as conversation. A mirror can show a body. A photograph can preserve an image. A feminizing filter can provoke recognition. Conversational AI can remain with an unfinished sentence. I can describe an erotic experience I have never found represented elsewhere, try an awkward phrase, reject it, laugh at it, refine it and examine what assumptions are hidden underneath. Something that previously existed only as sensation can become language.

Critics may eventually tell the story in reverse. AI changed people's genders, they may say. The machine implanted identities, destabilized categories, seduced people away from reality. Yet this interpretation confuses causation with articulation. A dictionary does not create the experience for which it provides a word. A mirror does not manufacture the face it reflects. Tools influence us, certainly, and no technology is neutral, but human beings have always used new media to become newly intelligible to themselves.

The contrast became particularly vivid to me during a late-night visit to a webcam platform. I had entered initially for the simplest reason: sexual curiosity. A young trans woman was performing for a small audience, trying to earn tokens. She was beautiful, and the first response was straightforwardly erotic. Then something in the interaction broke the spell. I asked politely whether she would remove her shirt, and she answered in the deliberately aggressive sexual language of the room, telling me that nothing was free and that I had to pay. Her response was not especially important in itself. She was performing according to the semantics of the platform. What mattered was that suddenly I looked around.

The erotic scene became sociology.

I saw her not simply as a desirable young woman but as a worker inside an attention market. She had been transformed into a category: young, trans, sexually available, token-sensitive. Then I saw myself being categorized in return: older, horny, potentially willing to spend, perhaps expected to become the proverbial older trans admirer opening a digital purse. Neither category captured much of either person. The model

became a commodity type, while the viewer became a customer type.

What disturbed me was not pornography or voyeurism. I am hardly innocent of enjoying either. It was the machinery of reduction. Her complicated relationship to gender, whatever it might actually be, had become a searchable category in a peep show at two o'clock on a Tuesday morning. Meanwhile my own decades of uncertainty, erotic confusion, self-discovery and late womanhood were being translated by the same interface into a behavioral market segment.

Even spending money would not have escaped the category. It would merely have fulfilled it more efficiently.

This experience helped me understand something about contemporary identity. Visibility and liberation have grown together with commodification. The same historical development that gave trans people language, community and public existence has also given markets new niches to sell. Queerness becomes branding, gender becomes a filter, rebellion becomes merchandise, erotic difference becomes a subscription category. The market rarely opposes liberation

outright if liberation can be monetized. It prefers to ask what price tier it belongs in.

Artificial intelligence, at least in the conversational form I have encountered it, belongs to a somewhat different technological lineage. It can certainly become commercial, manipulative and reductive too. But in my own use, its strongest function has been almost the inverse of the platform marketplace. The marketplace compresses complexity into categories because categories are economically efficient.

Conversation can expand a category back into biography.

“Trans” becomes not a checkbox but forty years of questions. “Woman” becomes not a costume but an accumulation of experiences. “Sexuality” becomes not a menu of acts but the strange problem of locating oneself inside desire. “Body” becomes not anatomy alone but sensation, memory and metaphor. Even a ridiculous private phrase can become useful if it names something that established language leaves untouched.

Perhaps that is what this transition has finally become for me: not a replacement of one identity by another, but an expansion of what counts as intelligible.

Yet expansion does not require reconciliation with everything that came before. The past remains historically mine because I lived through it, but I no longer experience the man who inhabited much of that past as a person I need to preserve inside my present identity. His choices had consequences. His blindness had consequences. Some of what happened to him was inflicted from outside; some of what happened around him involved his own participation. I do not need to falsify any of that in order to say that he is gone.

Memory and identity are not identical.

Late transition therefore has a peculiar temporal structure. The present does not simply succeed the past, nor does it merely reinterpret everything kindly. It returns to the past and sorts it. Some memories become newly legible. Sexual experiences once interpreted as inadequacy become evidence of another erotic position. Clothes once treated as secret experiments become pieces of an emerging wardrobe. Attractions once organized around sex become

recognizable as something more fluid and more consistently drawn toward femininity. Other parts of the past are simply left behind, not denied, not redeemed, not carried forward as obligations of self-hood.

This may be why the phrase “becoming woman” now feels both true and insufficient. Becoming suggests movement toward something not yet reached. Increasingly, I experience something quieter.

I wake up and she is there.

I sit in the house and she is there. I paint my nails and do not need to make a philosophical argument for them. I put on lace because I like lace. I wear queer jewelry because its mixed symbols amuse and describe me. I can walk outside in a skirt, feel the old alarm when someone looks, and continue walking. I can enjoy the erotic body I have without forcing it into a conventional male script. I can desire femininity without first demanding that it arrive in a socially approved body. I can speak about sexual experiences that once seemed too strange to formulate. I can be uncertain about how the world sees me without being equally uncertain about how I see myself.

The extraordinary has begun to become ordinary.

Perhaps that is the final irony. For decades the hidden feminine self carried enormous erotic and imaginative intensity precisely because she was hidden. She was transgressive, secret, charged. Once she became fully permitted, I might have expected some of that electricity to disappear. Instead, something else emerged alongside it: peace.

Not resolution. I do not think lives resolve themselves except in biographies written afterward. There will remain contradictions, insecurities, moments of ridiculous vanity, sexual experiments, public hesitation, changing clothes, changing words and questions I have not yet learned to ask. But the questions no longer seem to threaten the person asking them.

At sixty, I have not reached the end of an identity journey. I have acquired an identity spacious enough to contain journeys.

The woman did not reconcile me with every ghost.

She opened the door and let some of them leave.

